English

MAUTHAUSEN
MEMORIAL | KZ-GEDENKSTÄTTE

Dinge erzählen
Things Tell Stories

Archaeology of the Mauthausen-Gusen Concentration Camp System

Catalogue of the exhibition
at the Mauthausen Memorial

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Foreword

Barbara Glück

When we think of archaeology, we usually associate it with antiquity or the Middle Ages, but not with a period still seemingly within reach, such as National Socialism and its violent crimes. There are still people living who experienced these themselves. And yet the material traces remain partially buried – in both the figurative and literal sense.

Archaeological excavations at sites of former concentration camps bring to light material traces that are evidence of the structures of oppression. As such, they make a significant contribution to historical education, to documentation and to memory.

As a memorial site, we are constantly reminded of the huge value represented by our partnerships. Since the Visitor Centre was built over 20 years ago, archaeologists have been part of all renovation and construction projects at Mauthausen, Gusen and the sites of former subcamps.

Memorial culture should not only be anchored in Mauthausen, as a symbol of the system; it needs to encompass the entire network of camps. Archaeological investigations support our efforts in this regard. Archaeology can research these 'vanished' places and help to clarify the specific characteristics of the various subcamps. The many personal items originating from all over Europe that were found on the site of the former tent camp in Mauthausen provide a clearer picture of prisoner society in the final months of the war.

Sometimes archaeological research can help restore dignity and identity to the victims. This was the case with the 'blood run-off ditch' at the site of the former Melk concentration camp. Human remains were found there in 2022 and these were then given a respectful burial and marked with a monument.

The exhibition 'Things Tell Stories' explores the archaeological investigations and methods used at sites of extreme human experience, and reflects on the significance of material evidence using real objects from our collections.

The catalogue documents this work and invites further exploration. Our special thanks go to our cooperation partners: the Department of Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology at the University of Vienna, which has been carrying out excavations at the sites of former concentration camps since 2002 – since 2007 under the direction of Claudia Theune – and the team of Barbara Hausmair from the Department of Archaeologies at the University of Innsbruck.

Interview

with Claudia Theune and Barbara Hausmair

Archaeologists Claudia Theune and Barbara Hausmair documenting industrial scrap in the drained pond in the 'Wiener Graben' quarry
© Sebastian Swientek

As non-experts, how might we picture an archaeological dig?
Claudia Theune (CT): Excavations can be very different. First of all, thorough preparation involving archive research is very important. As a rule, there are 8-15 people on site. During the actual excavation work with spades, shovels, and large and small trowels or spatulas, the aim is to identify human interventions in the ground (e.g. based on the composition or colour of the soil). Because excavations destroy finds, it is essential to carry out very detailed documentation, e.g. through photographs, drawings, measurements and written descriptions.

One of the items on the wall of tools in the exhibition is a photogrammetry station. What else do you pack when you go on a dig?
Barbara Hausmair (BH): Drinking water, traditional excavation tools, high-end technical equipment for digital documentation, huge amounts of packing materials – and …
CT: … an otherwise empty diary. Digs always need a lot of time and energy and the days are not limited to a standard 8-hour day.

Why is documentation during the dig so central to your work?
CT: Excavations always destroy archaeological contexts. Therefore, very detailed documentation using photography (3D scanning where applicable), hand-drawn or digital sketches, measurements and written descriptions are essential. As well as preparation, follow-up is important. All data is compiled into a comprehensive report with initial interpretations.

What does the context of a find reveal?
CT: During an excavation, an object is always found in a particular context. Finds in barracks can be attributed to the lives of the prisoners in the barracks, while finds in rubbish pits reveal people's disposal habits. Both examples also say something about the value of the objects at different times – were

they valuable for survival in the concentration camp, or had they lost their value, possibly after the war, and been thrown away?

What happens to the objects you dig up?
BH: After careful preliminary treatment at the excavation site, the finds are inventoried and then cleaned and preserved in a conservation workshop. Researchers or students then document and examine the items using methods such as digital photography, 3D scanning, and scientific and stylistic analyses. It is particularly important to compare the finds with excavation data and other historical sources.

Our photo shows you both in 2012 in a basket above the drained pond in the 'Wiener Graben' quarry. What were you doing there?
CT: Since we couldn't go down onto the drained pond bed, we climbed into the basket of a fire engine's turntable ladder [see photo] and documented the site from there.
BH: We mainly found large objects that had been discarded from the quarry, such as rail tracks, wagons and parts of the floodlight system. Having been submerged in water, these metal objects were very well preserved as a result of the lack of air.
CT: The pond was a huge rubbish dump. For us, it was an important insight that after liberation, a great deal of stuff was disposed of here that apparently no longer had any value or that people deliberately wanted to forget.

There are a lot of myths surrounding concentration camps. Have you found any secret passages or rooms during excavations or building archaeology work in Mauthausen?
BH: No secret passages have been discovered so far. But there are areas that no one has entered for a long time, such as the 'disinfection bunker' in Camp II.
When we excavate demolished areas of the camp or inspect sealed shafts, we always discover something new. Sometimes this is something horrific – in rubble-filled light wells between the kitchen and the prison, we found traces of human ash in the rubble that had simply been dumped there. The Mauthausen Memorial buried these remains in its cemetery.

What is special about the prisoner tags from the Mauthausen concentration camp that you are researching in the 'TAGS' project?
BH: What is special is that not all of the 260 prisoner tags are those officially issued by the SS. Some were designed and crafted in artistic fashion by the prisoners themselves. We are interested in what these decorations can reveal about

the prisoners and social relationships in the camp. What metals were the tags made of, and what tools did the prisoners use to make them? Where did they get these materials?

Archaeology also has to contend with the fragility of materials. What deteriorates the fastest?
BH: Organic materials such as leather, wood and natural textiles usually decompose in the soil after just a few decades. The only remains of clothing are often metal parts such as buckles or shoe eyelets. Paper, for example a letter or a photograph, also has little chance of surviving in the soil. Thin aluminium quickly corrodes into powder, while plastics soon become brittle and crumble when they come into contact with air.

Why are visitors not allowed to touch the objects on display in the exhibition?
BH: Finds are often very fragile and susceptible to corrosion, especially when handled with bare hands. To prevent damage, they are placed in secure, climate-controlled display cases. During workshops, certain stable objects can be examined with gloves and under the supervision of an expert. The tactile nature of the objects thus becomes an essential element of learning with objects.

How can AI support your work, and what are its limitations?
BH: There has been a lot of development of AI tools in the field of digital archaeology, e.g. for automated recognition of sites, documentation processes, and analysing finds. It is important to note that in all these applications, all AI-generated information must always be subject to critical review, and what is done with this information is and remains the responsibility of the researchers.

What, for you, is the central message of the exhibition? What are you hoping visitors will take away with them?
CT: Archaeological investigations have been carried out at the Mauthausen concentration camp system since 2002, and particularly since 2009. I hope that people will recognise that, with the help of archaeology, small and unremarkable objects can often provide important insights into the Nazi era, the inhuman regime of terror, exploitation, everyday exclusion, coping strategies and thus the scope for action available to prisoners.
BH: History is today's society looking back at the past. I hope that visitors go home and think: 'Today I gained new perspectives on the history of Nazi persecution' – 'What can I learn from this that will help shape our future?'.

Exhibiting Archaeology

Nora Pierer and Nathalie Soursos (curatorial team)

With its title, the exhibition points to an experience at the heart of archaeological research: objects are not merely material remains but are carriers of history, of stories. When curating the exhibition, our key questions were therefore: What conditions enable objects to speak in the exhibition space? How can visitors understand the work behind these objects, the archaeological research carried out at sites of the former Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp system?

The exhibition architecture takes its cue from the working methods of archaeology. The objects are presented in display cases on work tables. This setting calls attention to the research that takes place before and after an archaeological dig, to the detailed examination and classification of objects. Archaeological finds associated with National Socialism carry a historical and emotional charge. Presenting them in an understated setting allows them to be viewed as historical sources. Thus the exhibition displays, showcase design and graphic elements do not foreground the objects, but rather place them within a thematic framework. The sheer volume of archaeological objects in the collections of the Mauthausen Memorial is suggested by the densely packed arrangement in the display cases. It was only possible to exhibit a selection of objects, partly for conservation reasons.

The exhibition design avoids a linear narrative structure and instead encourages visitors to explore the space independently. The introductory panels explain the scientific and archaeological work, the methods and tools of the archaeologist. Photographs from fieldwork carried out by archaeologists excavating the former Mauthausen concentration camp and its subcamps since 2002 show the variety and range of collaborative work – from documenting architectural structures and investigating landscapes to recovering and analysing objects.

The main part of the exhibition focuses on three interrelated aspects: spaces, objects and time. The chronology spans the construction of the Mauthausen concentration camp, the liberation of the camps, the post-war period and the present-day Mauthausen Memorial.

Many of the items on show are simple, everyday objects, neither unusual nor

rare. Some are things we still use in our daily lives today. As archaeological finds, however, their materiality and context point to daily acts of cruelty, to deprivation, conformity and resistance in the lives of the concentration camp inmates, as well as to the mechanisms of oppression and the privileges enjoyed by the SS and prisoner functionaries. The historical significance of these objects emerges from the context of where they were found, the circumstances of their discovery and the methodological approaches of the archaeologists. The marked use of different colours in the exhibition to differentiate the find locations is intended to highlight the diversity of the objects and the places where they were found.

Information folders next to the display cases invite visitors to conduct their own research. The additional texts, images and in-depth materials create connections and broaden the context. Information is organised in such a way that visitors can discover and explore it step by step.

The colours used in the exhibition are based on the Nazi-era and post-war paintwork in the Mauthausen inmate brothel. The contour lines, a graphic element running through the exhibition, are aligned with the terrain of the Mauthausen Memorial. In this way, the materiality of the geographical site becomes part of the exhibition graphics.

Exhibiting always involves making selections, compiling and prioritising. This exhibition reveals how archaeological findings are produced: through excavation, documentation, comparison and interpretation. Visitors gain an insight into these processes and are invited to take a closer look, piece together information and develop their own lines of enquiry.

'Things Tell Stories' seeks to engage critically with the material traces of the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp system. As such, it brings into focus material remains that had long been left to fade from sight – and which today play a central role in understanding the history of this place.

Things Tell Stories.

Archaeology of the Mauthausen-Gusen Concentration Camp System

Prehistoric times, antiquity and the Middle Ages have long been the focus of archaeology. In the late 1980s, archaeological research in German-speaking countries began to turn towards more recent history, including the Nazi period.

Since 2002, archaeologists have been investigating the material remains of the Mauthausen concentration camp and its subcamps. In the post-war period, most of the more than 40 subcamps were dismantled, built over or left to fall into ruin. Archaeology is helping to locate these camps, research them and make them visible again. At the same time, archaeologists continuously monitor construction and renovation projects in order to document and preserve historical structures.

Much of what once existed at former concentration camp sites is no longer visible. Buildings were torn down, modified or built over. Objects were taken away after liberation, were discarded or altered by later uses. Nevertheless, numerous relics are still preserved in the ground. The material an object was made from, how it was made, traces of use and where it was found provide information about its origin, its use in daily camp life and its significance to both victims and perpetrators.

Archaeologists uncover traces and finds in the ground, analyse objects from the everyday life of the camp, and study buildings and landscapes. Alongside witness testimonies, written documents and photographs, this material evidence represents another source for new insights into the Nazi concentration camp system.

Archaeological finds give material form to power and powerlessness, terror and survival strategies, daily life and exclusion, change and memory.

This exhibition explores the history of the Mauthausen camp complex from three perspectives: spaces, objects and time.

In the tent camp, archaeologists find drainage ditches containing many artefacts lost by prisoners, 2012.
© Barbara Hausmair

Excavating Mauthausen

Archaeologists are trying to find answers to specific questions. To do this, they search for traces in the landscape and study historical plans and photographs in archives. Excavations reveal the layers of evidence preserved in the ground. How well preserved these traces are depends a lot on the material and the soil conditions. Metal, ceramics and masonry survive more often than textiles or wood, which usually decompose quickly in the ground. Any insight is always partial. Objects were taken away after liberation, were discarded or altered by later uses. Nevertheless, numerous relics are still preserved in the ground.

Archaeological Methods

Remote Sensing

Historical photos, aerial images and plans allow archaeologists to determine the original dimensions of the camps. They use geographical information systems to compare this with modern aerial photographs, satellite images and digital elevation models.

Field-walking Surveys

Archaeologists systematically walk across a site (survey) and document any foundations visible on the surface or small-scale changes to the terrain. Finds on the surface (stray finds) are secured.

Geophysical Methods

Geophysical methods make structural remains in the ground visible using ground penetrating radar (GPR) and geomagnetic devices. Archaeologists use the data to create digital images of what is hidden.

Building Archaeology

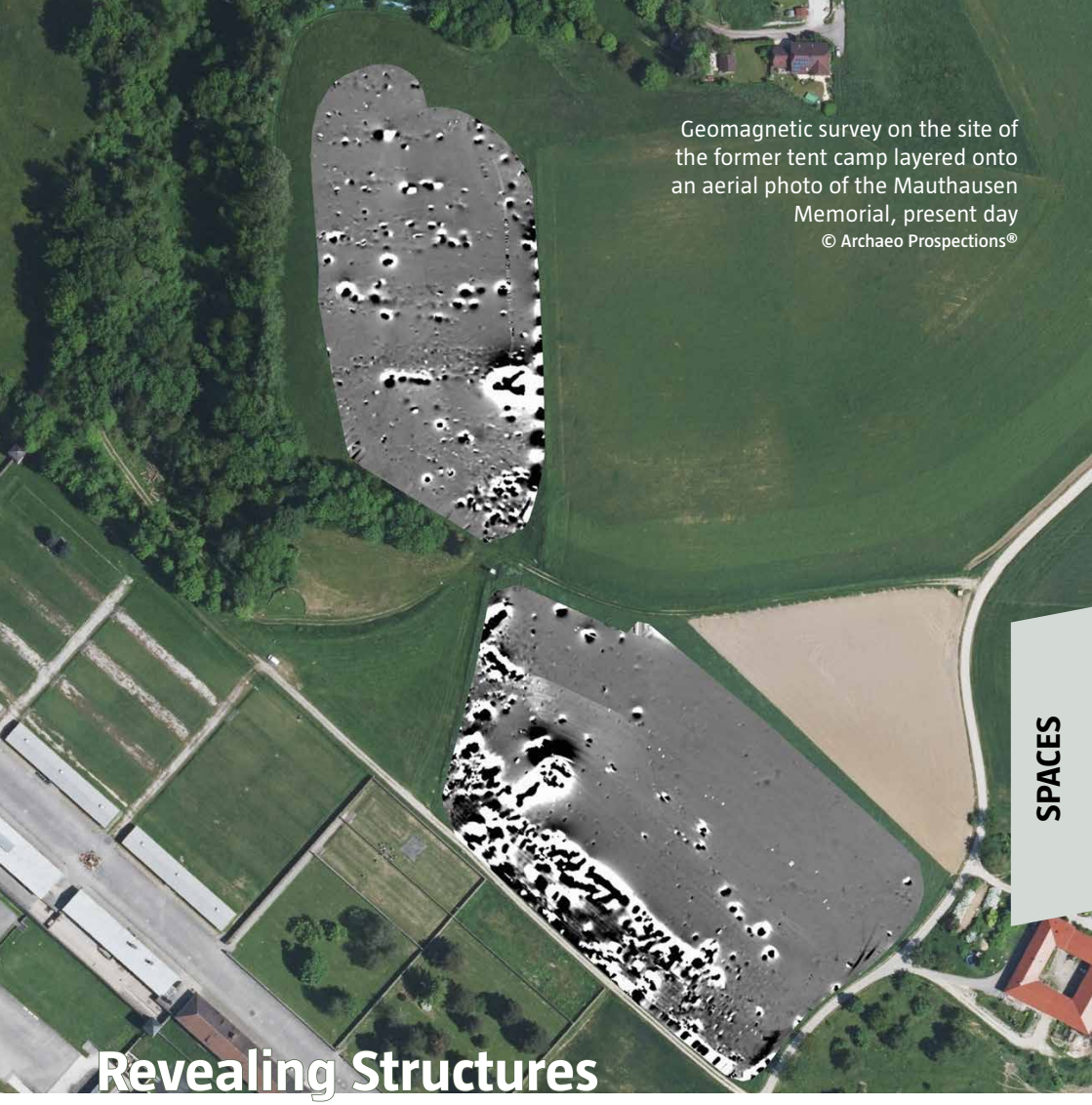
Researchers use methods from building archaeology to investigate the remaining buildings and to compare them with historical reports, images and plans. This reveals the different construction phases of the buildings and identifies alterations.

Archaeological Excavations

Archaeologists use targeted digs to excavate structures preserved in the ground, such as building remains or ditches, layer by layer. Findings are measured, photographed and digitally documented. Objects are secured and later cleaned, preserved and studied in the laboratory.

Material Culture Studies

Every object has a biography – from its production to its different uses to its disposal. By looking at signs of wear, alterations, age and find context, archaeologists can discover what an object meant to different people.



Geomagnetic survey on the site of the former tent camp layered onto an aerial photo of the Mauthausen Memorial, present day
© Archaeo Prospections®

Revealing Structures

Concentration camp prisoners had no freedom and no private sphere. The SS controlled all movement and decided who was permitted to enter or leave the camp. Archaeological investigations explore the different structures, access restrictions, functions, and meanings of these spaces.

Comparing historical plans with aerial photographs reveals the extent to which original construction plans were realised. Archaeologists compare historical visual sources with modern digital site models, aerial photos and satellite images. This enables them to identify which areas of the former camp were built over, altered or no longer exist.

Rediscovering Forgotten Places

The Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp system comprised more than 40 subcamps, which are located on this map. Archaeological investigations took place at the named locations in the years listed. Archaeology played a significant role in researching and locating these forgotten sites.

G **Gusen I**
2003, 2004, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023

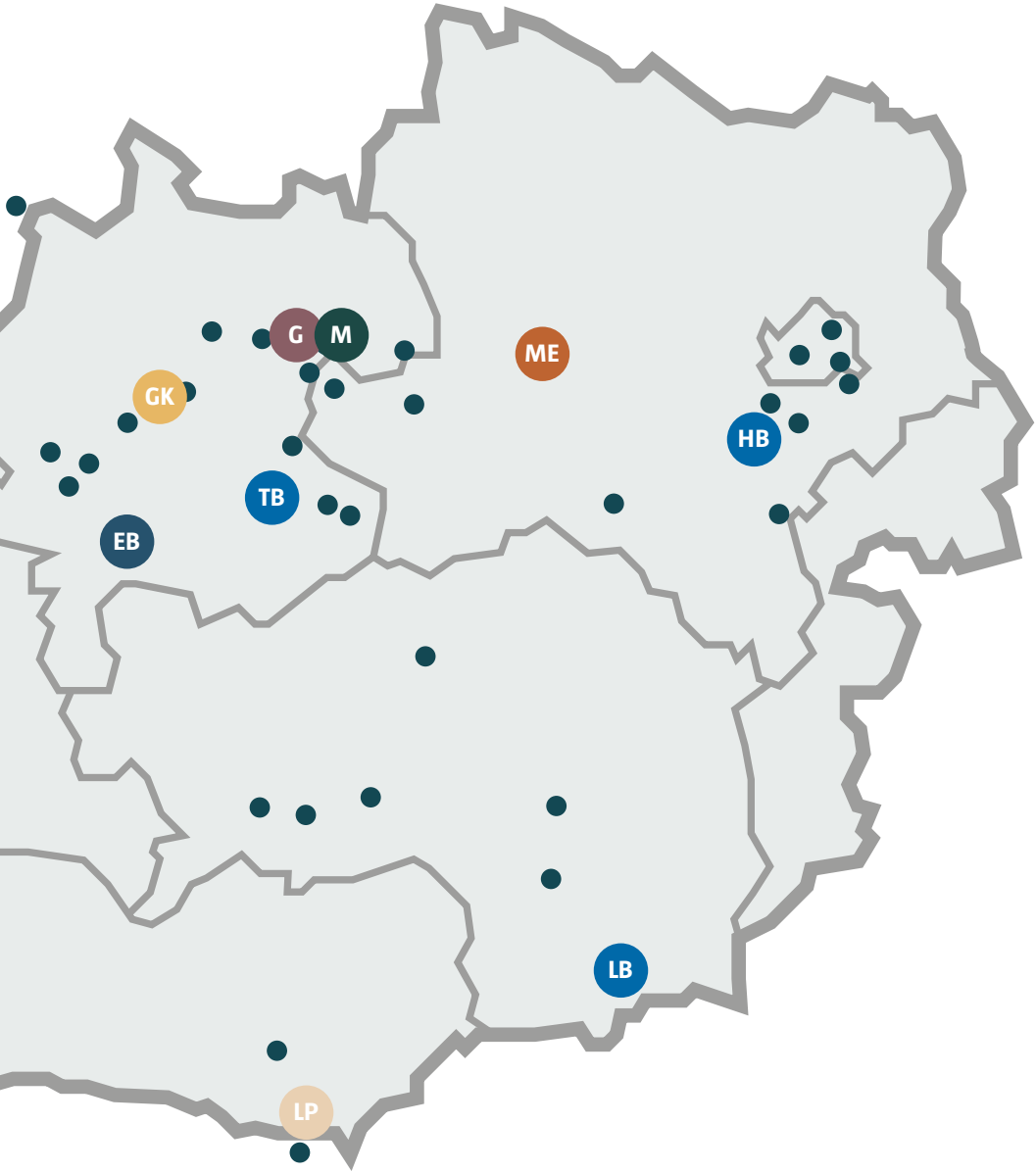
Gusen III – Lungitz
2018

Gusen – ‚Bergkristall'
2013, 2014, 2016

Gusen – SS Firing Range
2014, 2015

M **Mauthausen**
2002, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2021, 2023, 2024

EB **Ebensee**
2009, 2023



LP Loibl Pass (North)
2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018

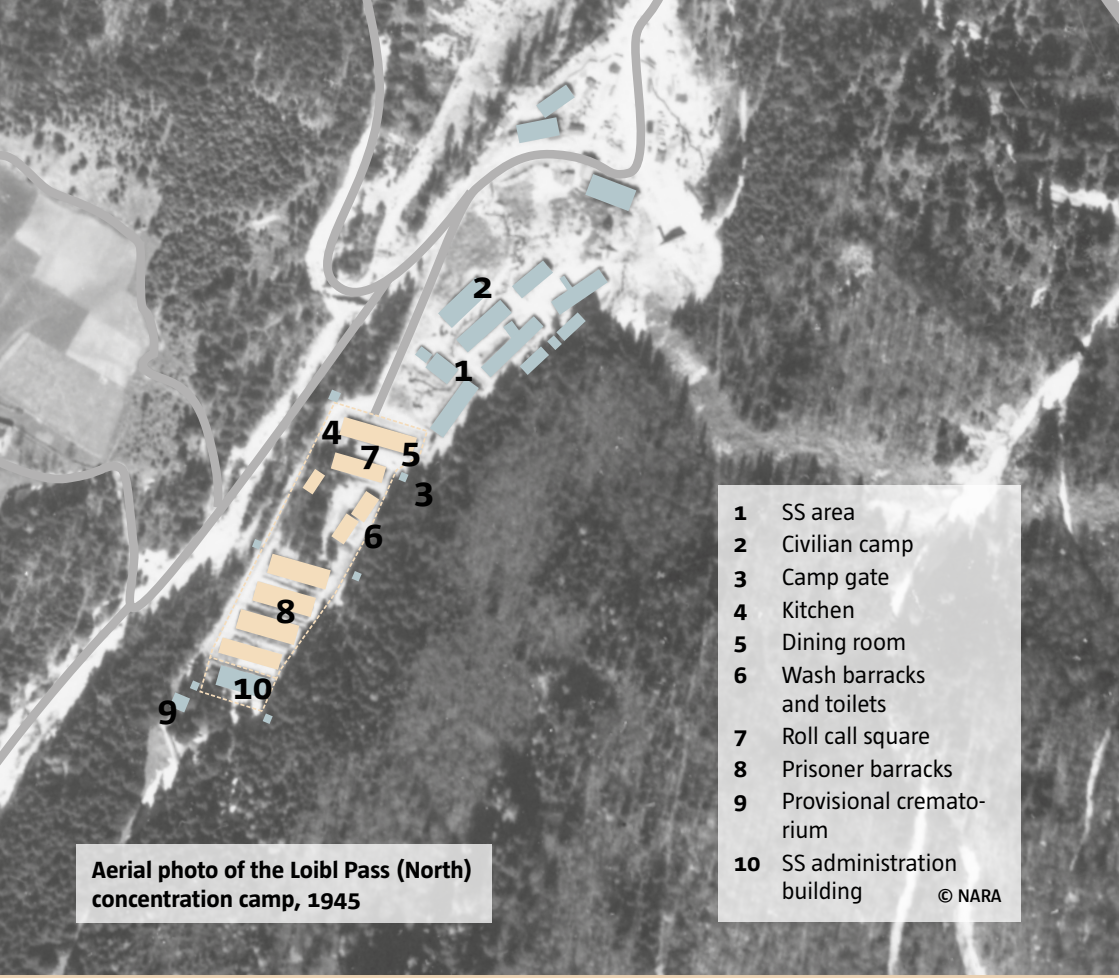
GK Gunskirchen
2011, 2017, 2019

ME Melk
2013, 2014, 2023, 2024

TB Ternberg
2020

LB Leibnitz
2023, 2024

HB Hirtenberg
2021, 2022, 2024



Aerial photo of the Loibl Pass (North) concentration camp, 1945

Loibl Pass (North)

In 1941, construction began on a road tunnel, which is still in use today, through the Karawanken Mountains as part of the Loibl/Ljubelj Alpine Pass. From 1943 onwards, subcamps were set up on both sides of the tunnel: the Loibl Pass (South) camp in present-day Slovenia, and the Loibl Pass (North) camp on what is now the Austrian side.

After the war, the Loibl Pass (North) camp was long forgotten. The site was overgrown by woodland. Archaeological surveys and excavations were carried out between 2011 and 2018. These investigations exposed the outlines of the prisoner barracks, kitchen barracks, roll call square and entrance gate. Several remaining pieces of the fence were found at the edge of the woods. This archaeological work revealed the dimensions of the camp.

Camp gate at the Loibl Pass (North) subcamp, 1945

The camp was secured by a fence with several watchtowers and a simple wooden gate. This is in stark contrast to the solid camp wall and gate in Mauthausen.

Archaeologists excavating the roll call square in the former Loibl Pass (North) subcamp, 2013

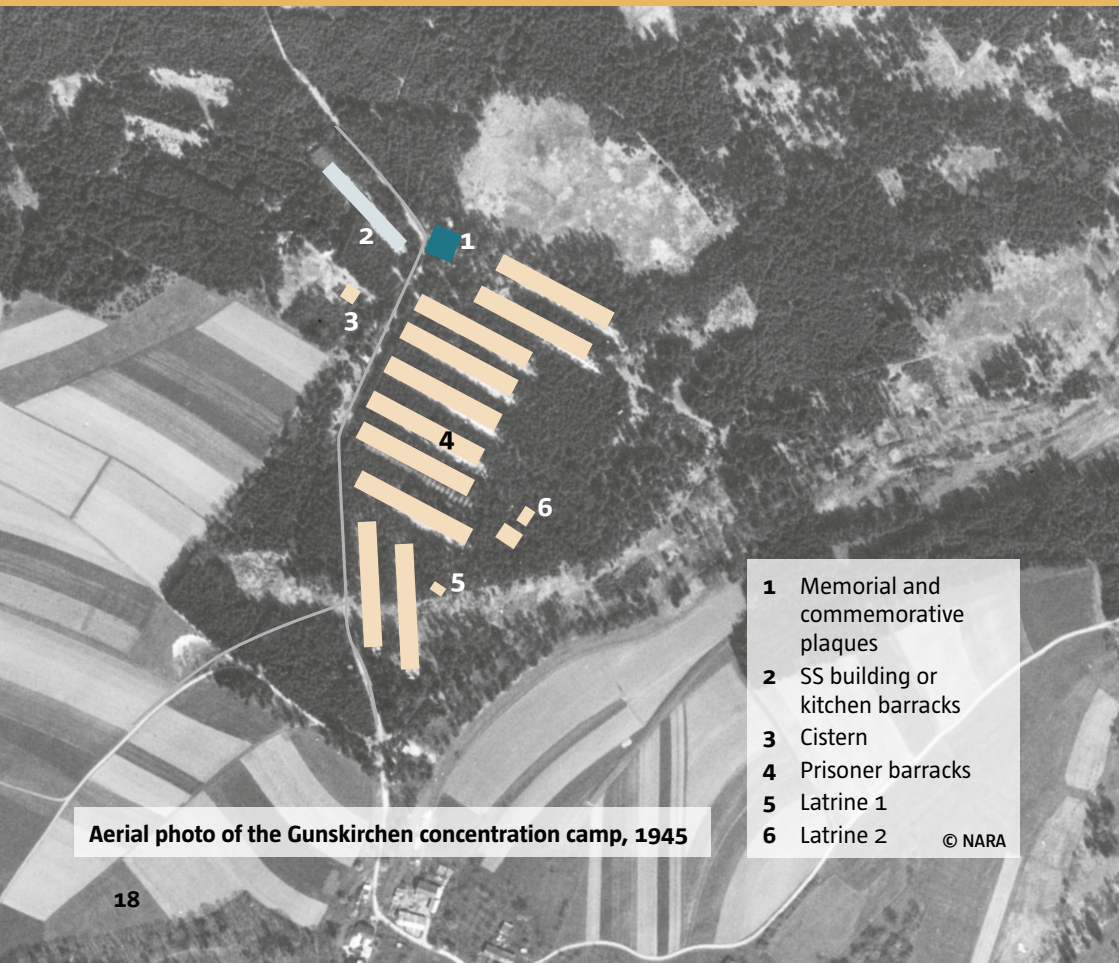
The remains of the foundations of the kitchen barracks are visible next to the yellowish, sandy surface of the roll call square.

Gunskirchen

The Gunskirchen subcamp existed from December 1944 until its liberation on 5 May 1945. It served as a holding camp for Jewish people deported from Hungary.

Initial field-walking surveys in 2011 located the foundations of ten prisoner and one SS barracks and several latrines. That the foundations were still visible shows that although the barracks were later torn down, the site was never completely cleared or built over. A subsequent GPS-guided survey in 2019 searched the site in a tight grid pattern. Numerous objects were recovered from nearly 100 find spots.

There are several reasons why many different objects were preserved in Gunskirchen. Above all, in the final months of the war, not all prisoners were registered and their possessions were no longer confiscated.



Aerial photo of the Gunskirchen concentration camp, 1945

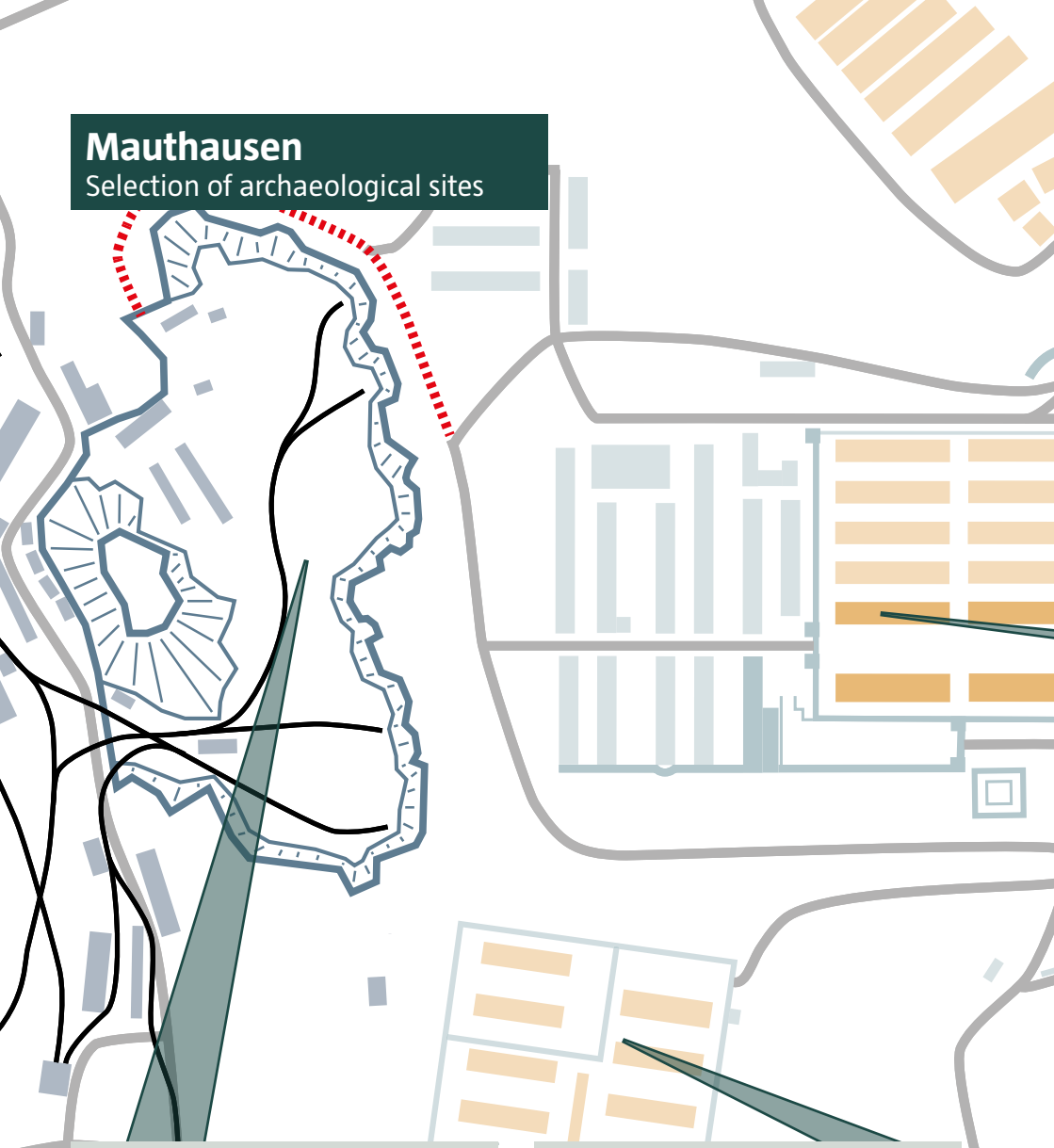
Taking measurements during the survey, 2011

In 2011 and 2019, finds were recovered from the forest floor at the site of the former Gunskirchen camp. Using digital measuring equipment, researchers were able to document the precise locations of these objects.

Stray finds on the forest floor, 2011

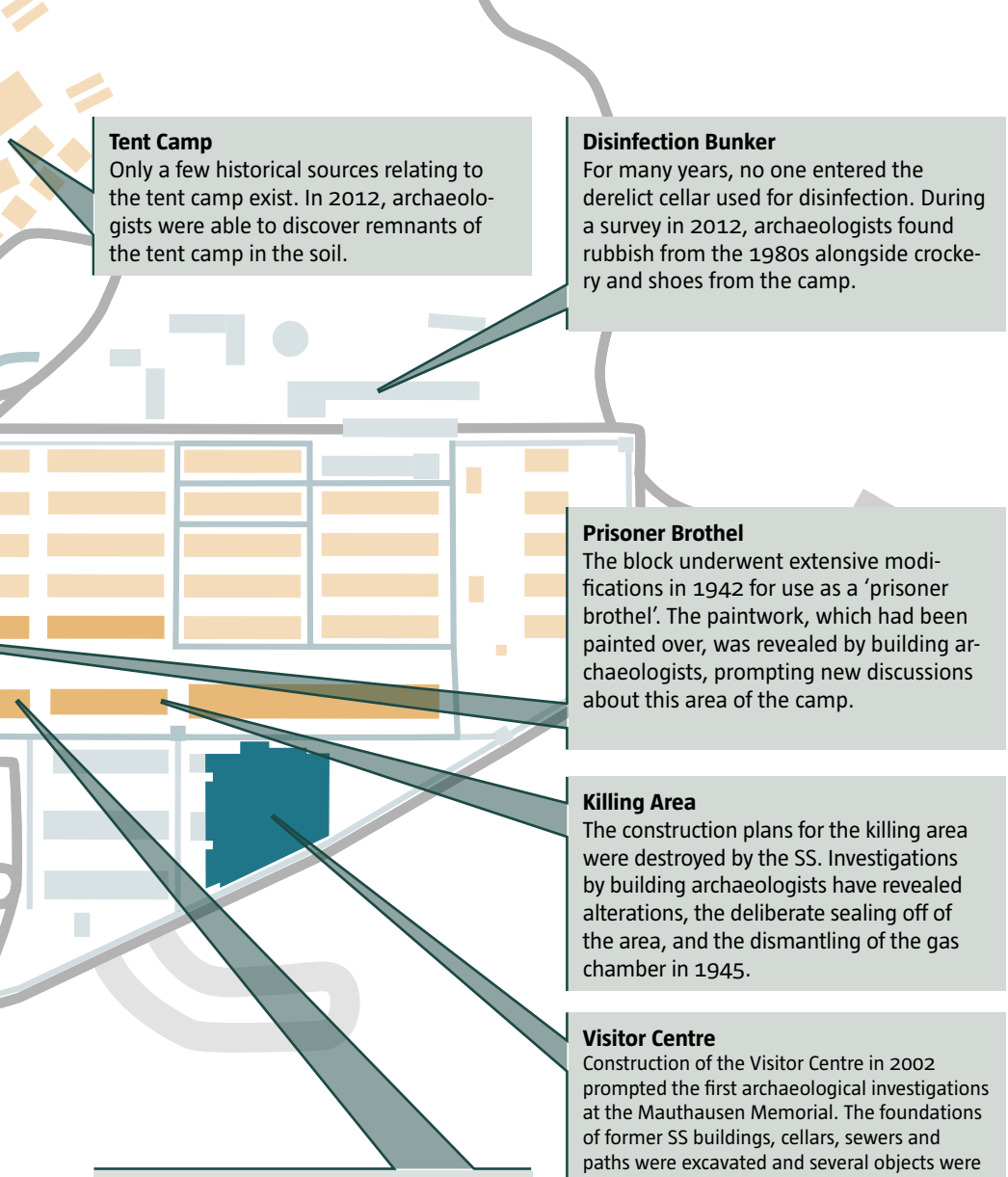
When surveying and documenting the stray finds, researchers record important information such as the precise location of the object, the date and the object number. A scale and a north arrow on the photos provide necessary information about the exact position and size of the finds.

Mauthausen
Selection of archaeological sites



The 'Wiener Graben' Quarry
A dive carried out in 2012 in a pond identified numerous finds: rail tracks, several transport wagons, pipes and a dilapidated truck. The water had stopped oxygen getting to the objects, thus protecting them from decay.

Infirmary Camp
Archaeological investigations in 2009 and 2010 were unable to find proof that the camp was completely burned down after liberation. Although traces of fire were found, had the camp burned down completely, the evidence of this would have been much stronger.



Tent Camp
Only a few historical sources relating to the tent camp exist. In 2012, archaeologists were able to discover remnants of the tent camp in the soil.

Disinfection Bunker
For many years, no one entered the derelict cellar used for disinfection. During a survey in 2012, archaeologists found rubbish from the 1980s alongside crockery and shoes from the camp.

Prisoner Brothel
The block underwent extensive modifications in 1942 for use as a 'prisoner brothel'. The paintwork, which had been painted over, was revealed by building archaeologists, prompting new discussions about this area of the camp.

Killing Area
The construction plans for the killing area were destroyed by the SS. Investigations by building archaeologists have revealed alterations, the deliberate sealing off of the area, and the dismantling of the gas chamber in 1945.

Visitor Centre
Construction of the Visitor Centre in 2002 prompted the first archaeological investigations at the Mauthausen Memorial. The foundations of former SS buildings, cellars, sewers and paths were excavated and several objects were recovered.

Kitchen Barracks
The kitchen barracks revealed evidence of a room whose function is still unclear today. In the *Kesselhalle*, marks on the floor show where several high-powered pressure cookers were anchored.

SS Supply Networks

The concentration camps were supplied by a range of state institutions, regional businesses and large companies from across the German Reich and occupied territories. Company stamps are visible on over 100 recovered objects, pointing to specific manufacturers.

Tile 'VIENNA MADE IN GERMANY'
Archaeological find, Mauthausen refuse deposit, 2012

Many tiles from Mauthausen are stamped with 'Vienna Made in Germany'. This means that they date from 1938 at the earliest.

Roof tile 'FREIWALDAU'
Stray find, Mauthausen basement, kitchen barracks, 2013

'M-FREIWALDAU' refers to the place of manufacture in Silesia (today Gozdnica, Poland). The font style and the 'M' identify it as made by the Sturm company.

Part of a telephone handset with the logo 'SH'
Stray find, Gunskirchen, survey in 2011

'SH' stands for the company 'Siemens & Halske'. It set up a production facility at the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp in 1942.

'Bohemia' porcelain cup
Loibl Pass (North), 1940

The cup was produced in the SS's own 'Bohemia' porcelain factory in Neurohlau (today Nová Role, CZ). A Reich eagle and swastika were scratched off either before or after 1945.

Enamelled bowl with 'KLM' [Konzentrationslager Mauthausen] stamp
Archaeological find, Mauthausen SS drill ground and football pitch, 2017

Investigating Prisoners' Daily Lives

Objects help people satisfy basic needs such as eating food, shelter or hygiene, and are an element of human identity. Everyday objects are not only functional but also have social, emotional or symbolic significance.

Within the framework of material culture studies, objects are examined with regard to their use, significance, alteration, circulation and find context. As historical sources, they are evidence of prisoners' agency even under extreme conditions.

Food

Everyday life for the prisoners was marked by constant hunger. Owning a bowl and a spoon was essential for survival, enabling them to eat soup and maintain a minimum level of dignity. The crockery issued to prisoners was made of cheap tin, with spoons usually made of wood. Knives and forks were officially prohibited. However, metal spoons and knives circulated on the camp's internal black market.

Archaeological excavations have unearthed a variety of tableware items, including tinware and handmade knives, spoons, sieves and graters.

'Some tried to use their tongues like dogs, but all these attempts ended with smeared faces. The general reaction to this unnecessary humiliation, this subtle instrument of brutalisation, was despair.'

Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, former prisoner of the Mauthausen concentration camp (from: Gabriele Pflug, Notte nebbia – Nacht und Nebel [Notte nebbia – Night and Fog], Salzburg 2002, p. 19)

Enamelled cup with 'Luxor' stamp
Archaeological find, Mauthausen refuse deposit, 2012

Simple enamel cups were probably brought into the camp by prisoners. They were integral to their survival because they did not break.

Enamelled bowl
Stray find, Gunskirchen object recovery, 2019

Survivor Daniel Chanoch reported that red bowls were issued to prisoners in Auschwitz. The discovery of this bowl in Gunskirchen shows that prisoners took bowls with them from one camp to the next.

Enamelled bowl
(See p. 24)

Grater
Stray find, Gunskirchen, 2011

Holes were punched into an aluminium base to create a grater, which could grate hard foodstuffs into smaller pieces. This made it easier for sick and weak people to eat.

Spoon, handle modified as a knife
Unknown origin, probably tent camp

A prisoner bent the handle of this spoon and ground it down to make a sharp knife. Prisoners were not allowed to possess knives.

Clothing

Prisoners' clothing provided very little protection from cold, wet or heat. Many inmates wore items that did not fit or were damaged, often having been mended several times. The uneven stitches show that repairs were carried out by hand. Archaeological finds of textiles made from natural fibres are rare because these fabrics decompose quickly in the ground. This makes the few preserved clothing remnants all the more significant.

'We only got other clothing, made of grey linen with grey-blue striped jackets and caps, much later on. Unfortunately, there were clothes lice in the garments, which then plagued us. The worn-out shoes, which we got before leaving Auschwitz (they had been taken from other Auschwitz arrivals) mostly did not fit and our feet suffered with every step. There were not enough socks for all the women.'

Helena Milek, former prisoner of the Lenzing subcamp
(from: Helena Milek: Erinnerungen an Lenzing [Memories of Lenzing], Zurich 1994, Mauthausen Memorial)

Glove
Stray find, Gunskirchen, 2019

The size and style suggest this glove with fine decorative stitching is a woman's glove.

Buttons
Archaeological find, Melk, 2023

The size, shape, material and colour of the buttons can point to their original garments. Colourful buttons tend to come from women's or children's clothing.

Recovery of prisoner clothing during excavations at the former Gusen concentration camp, 2021
© Roman (Igl/ARDIG)

Wooden shoe sole
Archaeological find, Mauthausen trench, 2013

Shoes for prisoners were often improvised, made with wooden soles or from rubber, or cut from old car tires.

Garter
Stray find, Gunskirchen, 2011

It is rare to find objects that clearly belonged to female prisoners. This garter is one such example.

Close-up photograph of prisoner number 65347 with red triangle and 'U'

The number identified the prisoner and the red triangle was worn by political prisoners. The 'U' is for a prisoner categorised as 'Hungarian'.

Close-up photograph of the initials 'G' and 'J' embroidered on the inside of the jacket

A piece of fabric embridered with the coloured initials 'G' and 'J' was hand sewn onto the inside of the right breast panel.

Close-up photograph of a piece of fabric sewn on to the back of the jacket

The blue-and-grey striped fabric was sewn onto the centre of the back panel.

This coat was worn by Rudolf Andorka (1891 – 1961), a general, diplomat and opponent of the Nazis from Hungary. After liberation he returned to Hungary, where he was persecuted by the Communists until his death. His diary is a very important source on the Hungarian history of the Second World War.

Hygiene

Despite the extreme living conditions, many prisoners attempted to maintain their personal hygiene and with it their self-esteem. Archaeological finds highlight that this need persisted even under the most adverse circumstances. Heavy signs of wear show how intensively these objects were used. Such finds occur almost exclusively in areas established in the last few months of the Nazi regime. Whatever prisoners brought into the camp, they kept with them.

Comb made by the firm Hercules Sägemann
Stray find, Gunskirchen, 2011

This comb was manufactured by the firm New-York Hamburger Gummi-Waaren [rubber goods] Compagnie AG Hercules Sägemann.

Part of a razor
Archaeological find, Mauthausen tent camp, 2012

It is rare to find razors as they were prohibited in the camp due to their sharp blades.

Tin for Heyden Xeroform wound powder
Stray find, Gunskirchen, 2011

Xeroform, made by the firm Heyden, was a wound disinfectant powder. Open wounds could cause life-threatening inflammation or blood poisoning.

Lid from a Hungarian toothpaste tube
Archaeological find, Mauthausen tent camp, 2012

This tube of toothpaste arrived with a prisoner from Hungary in late 1944. When facing deportation, people decided to take toothpaste with them.

Belongings

Effects cards were used to record the items and personal belongings that prisoners had with them upon arrival at a concentration camp. Usually, these items were confiscated. It was almost impossible to smuggle anything into the camp. Only a few groups of prisoners, such as those from western Europe, were sometimes permitted to receive care parcels from their families or the Red Cross. Towards the end of the war, not all prisoners were still being registered and robbed upon arrival. As a result, personal items did find their way into the camp. Labels and inscriptions point to where prisoners were from or which groups they belonged to.

Mirror
Archaeological find, Mauthausen tent camp, 2012

The tent camp yielded a number of objects in the drainage ditches. Personal items are rare finds.

Necklace
Archaeological find, Mauthausen tent camp, 2012

This necklace, made up of numerous chain links, was also found in a drainage ditch in the tent camp.

Necklace with Star of David
Exhumation find, Gunskirchen exhumation, 1979

This symbol of Jewish faith was discovered when mass graves were exhumed in Gunskirchen.

French scapular medal with depictions of holy figures
Archaeological find, Loibl Pass (North), 2012

The silver medal shows a depiction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Virgin Mary with Jesus and a third person. The pendant is very worn.

Button with the word 'Serbia' in Cyrillic
Stray find, Mauthausen infirmary camp, 2025

This button is embossed with the word 'Serbia' (Srbija) in Cyrillic script and the Serbian coat of arms. The button therefore probably comes from an old Serbian uniform from the First World War.

Cross pendant
Archaeological find, Mauthausen infirmary building, 2010

A small cross pendant with a broken eyelet reflects Christian faith. The front depicts Jesus crucified on the cross, with the letters INRI visible on the upper arm of the cross.

Identity and Research as a Means of Restoring Identity

On arriving at the camp, prisoners were given a number which was sewn onto clothing and stamped onto a metal tag. Prisoners wore the tags on their wrists or around their necks. This identification was used by the SS administration and was a form of systematic dehumanisation: people were reduced to numbers.

However, some of the preserved tags are not those issued by the SS, but were made by the prisoners themselves. In some cases, they are skilfully decorated. Making individualised tags like this required craftsmanship and access to tools.

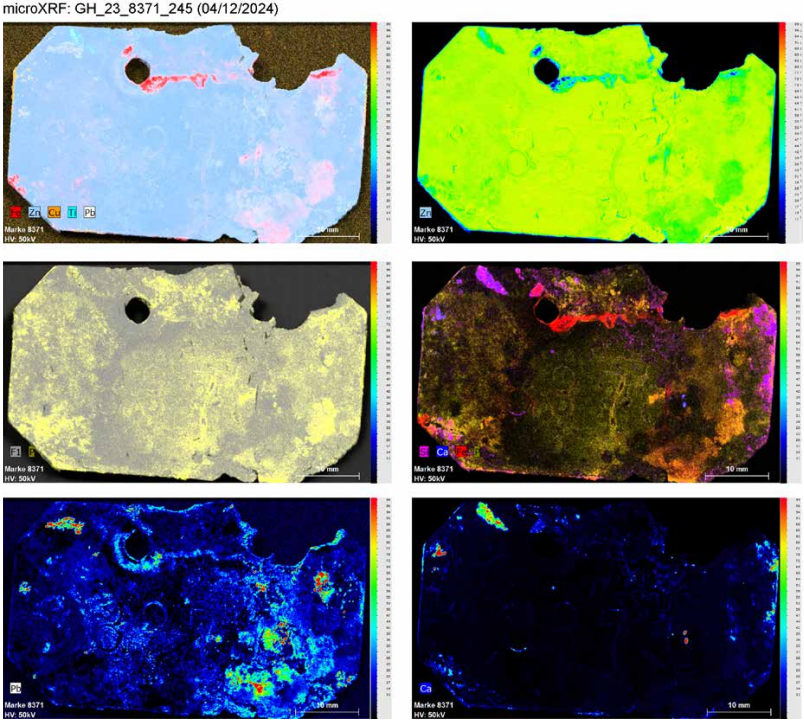
Prisoner tags were found in mass graves around the camps. Often, they are the only evidence of the death of prisoners who can be identified from their numbers. A research project at the University of Innsbruck ('TAGS') is using state-of-the-art methods such as digital 3D mapping to investigate the prisoner tags. X-ray fluorescence makes it possible to determine the composition of the metals. Stylistic analyses of the decorated tags provide new insights into the daily life and social reality of the camps.

'The dead were counted by the barracks elder and an SS officer, who removed the tin bracelets with their ID numbers. These were returned to the camp registrar and more names were crossed off the roster.'

(from: Roman Frister: The Cap or the Price of Life, New York 2001, p. 340-341)

Prisoner tag belonging to Alfredo Brambilla
Exhumation of the Marbach mass grave, 1969
© Thommy Theine

Prisoner tag belonging to Alexei Igumnov
Exhumation of the Marbach mass grave, 1969
© Christian Moritz



Results of the X-ray fluorescence analysis of Michał Epstein's tag, 2024

X-ray fluorescence is a method in which the tags are illuminated with X-rays in a special device. This allows the tag's chemical composition to be identified and then mapped on a digital image using different colours. Michał Epstein's prisoner tag consists mainly of zinc.

© Peter Tropper

Prisoner tag belonging to Michał Epstein, 2024

Excavation Hartheim Castle, 2002

© Ulrike Töchterle

You can read the biographies of the murdered prisoners in the ‚Virtual Room of Names'.

Metal plaque in the shape of an SS death's head
Archaeological find, Mauthausen SS drill ground and football pitch, 2017
The object is being photographed for the collections of the Mauthausen Memorial
© Silke Umdasch

Showing Inequalities

The objects found in the different areas of the camp illustrate the hierarchies within the Mauthausen concentration camp. Archaeologists recovered porcelain tableware and silver cutlery from the rubbish dumps of the SS canteen – in contrast to poor-quality tin tableware in the prisoner areas. While the prisoner barracks were makeshift, overcrowded and reduced to the bare essentials, the SS buildings were well built, spacious and had covered verandas.

Privileges

Some everyday objects were made especially for the perpetrators. This is evident from the SS symbols on porcelain tableware, for example. The archaeological finds provide insights into the daily lives of the perpetrators, something that is hardly documented in written sources. Other finds include glass bottles for alcohol and lemonade, tools, components from armaments production and medicine packaging.

Glass fragment from a Fanta bottle
Archaeological find, Mauthausen prison courtyard, 2010

The font on the transparent glass identifies this Fanta bottle as a product of the Nazi era.

Beer bottle
Archaeological find, Loibl Pass (North) civilian camp

Bottled beer for the SS was usually supplied from local breweries.

Porcelain tableware of the Office for the Beauty of Labour
Archaeological find, Mauthausen Visitor Centre, 2002/2003

The 'Office for the Beauty of Labour' was a Nazi organisation whose task was to optimise work processes in German companies. It also produced models for standardised canteen tableware.

Moped licence plate
Archaeological find, Mauthausen SS drill ground and football pitch, 2017

This licence plate with the imperial eagle comes from a Nazi police moped.

Hierarchy and Terror

The concentration camps were organised according to a strict hierarchy. The SS was divided into two groups with different functions: the camp administration staff, who ran the camp, and the guards, who were responsible for guarding the inmates. Prisoner functionaries carried out administrative and supervisory tasks for the SS and received privileges in return. The strict hierarchy inside the camp meant the loss of self-determination and freedom of choice for the prisoners. They were not permitted to move around freely and were subjected to violence on a daily basis.

'Members of the guard units were not allowed to enter the prisoners' camps (...). They were assigned only to duty on the watchtowers and perimeter cordon, and to guard prisoner transports and labour detachments. Only members of the administration staff had the right to enter the prisoners' camp.'

(from: Hans Maršálek: Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Mauthausen. Dokumentation [The History of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp. Documentation], Vienna 2006, p. 118)

Padlock
Archaeological find, Mauthausen infirmary camp, 2009

This small padlock from the infirmary camp was probably used to lock a cupboard or a box. Access to resources was restricted to a few individuals.

Fragments of barbed wire
Archaeological find, Mauthausen refuse deposit, 2012

Barbed wire surrounded the entire prisoners' camp. It is a common find in archaeological work, in small or large quantities.

Helmet with spike, worn by prisoners in the camp police
Archaeological find, Mauthausen Visitor Centre, 2002

The 'camp police' were a special group of prisoner functionaries. The SS provided them with uniforms and helmets dating from the First World War.

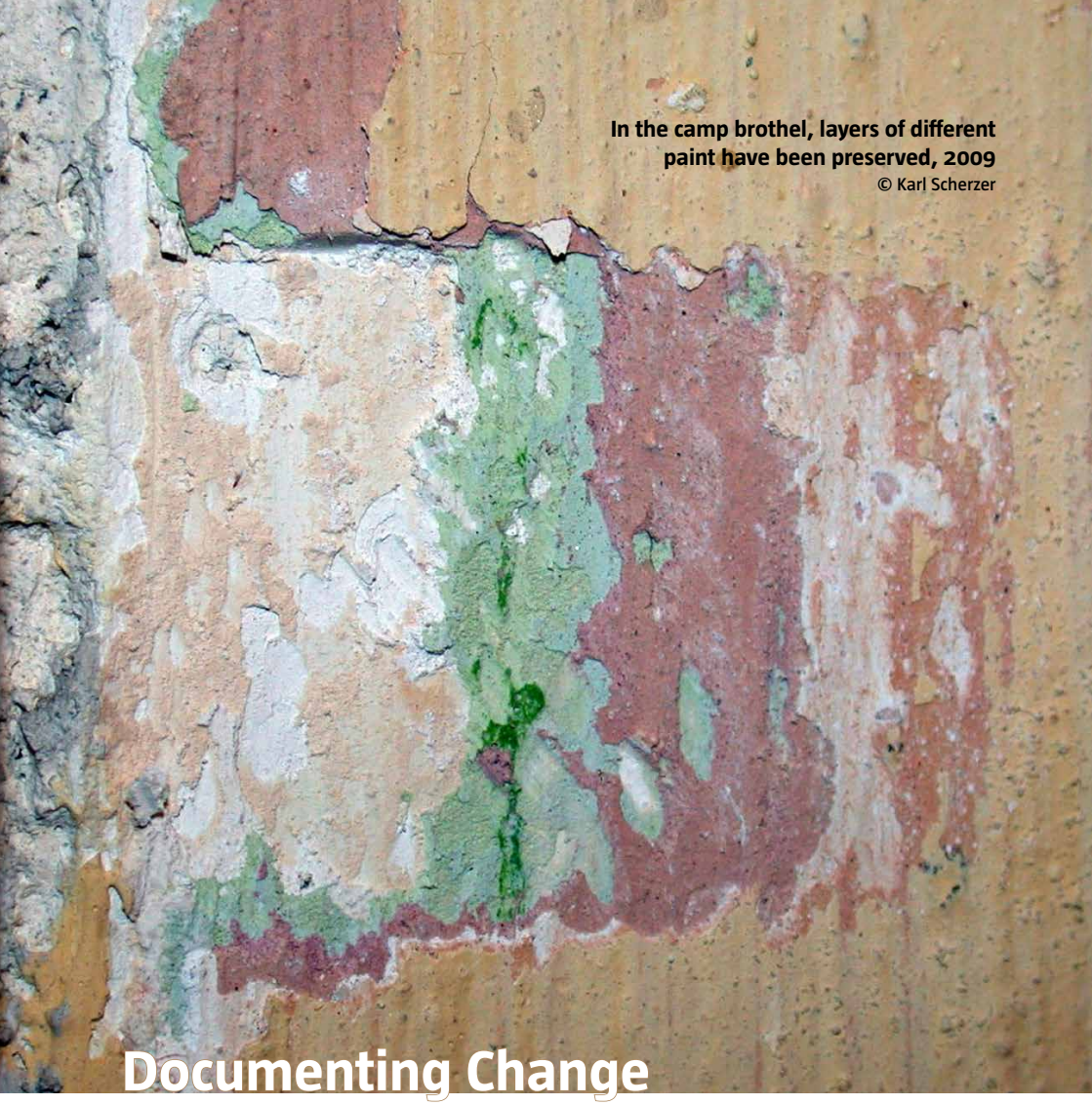
The helmets had a welded-on spike and were painted white. Thus they resembled the old spiked helmets of the German imperial era. Combined with oversized uniforms and old sabres, this 'uniform' set the 'camp police' apart from other prisoners, while also exposing them to ridicule.

Isolator
Archaeological find, Mauthausen tent camp, 2012

Porcelain insulators were used on the electric fences that surrounded the camp. The electrified barbed wire was intended to deter prisoners from attempting to escape.

Key
Stray find, Mauthausen detention building basement, 2025

Archaeologists found this key while surveying the camp prison. Individual prisoners were isolated, tortured and killed in the camp prison. Often they were political prisoners.



In the camp brothel, layers of different paint have been preserved, 2009
© Karl Scherzer

Documenting Change

Objects and buildings change over time – materials decay, functions adapt, things are thrown away and are forgotten.

Historical and archaeological research reveals these changes and documents the transformation from a camp to today's place of remembrance and learning – a historical place of memory, but one reshaped over time.

Liberation

Surprisingly, only a few archaeological finds can be linked to the liberators, for example a US Army tanker helmet and ammunition. Medicine packaging indicates that survivors were treated with US medical supplies.

US field mess kit hallmarked 'MED.DEPT.USA.'
Stray find, Mauthausen refuse deposit, 2020

Items from soldiers' mess kits often turn up during excavations. The shape and markings allow for precise identification. The wording 'MED.DEPT.USA.' shows that this crushed cup belonged to a US soldier.

Baxter transfusion bottles
Archaeological find, Mauthausen refuse deposit, 2012

The US troops brought medical supplies to the liberated camps to treat survivors. This included transfusion bottles made by the American company Baxter. These fragments were found in a refuse deposit near the Mauthausen camp.

Glass bottle from the US firm Meggeson
Stray find, Gunskirchen, 2011

An aftershave bottle from the American brand Meggeson is the only personal item belonging to a US soldier that has been found.

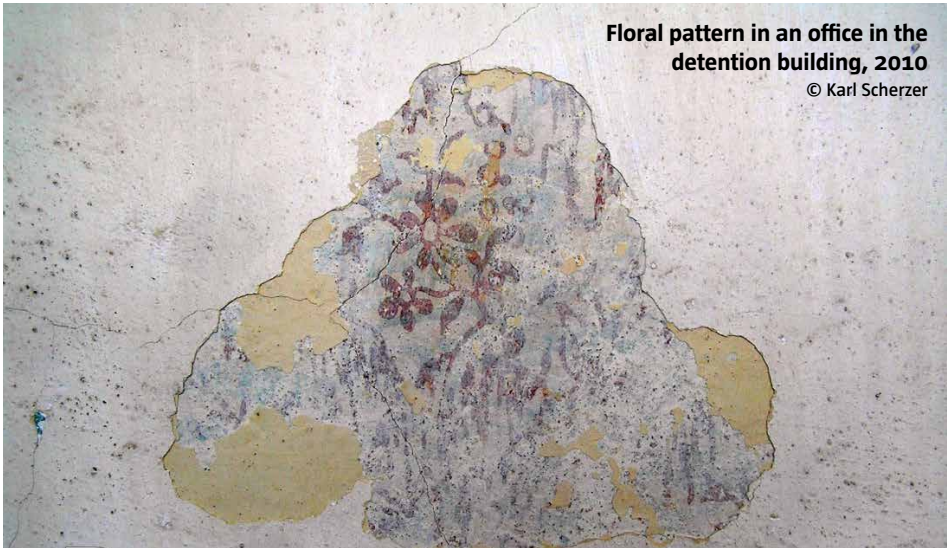
US Army helmet
Pond find, Mauthausen 'Wiener Graben' quarry, 2012

A US Army helmet with a bullet hole was recovered from the drained quarry pit. This suggests that the liberators also used the pit to dispose of unwanted items.

Mauthausen Memorial

By the time the site became a memorial, most of the original buildings were completely gone. The design of the memorial also led to several changes: rooms were modified and original paintwork covered over. Areas deemed unimportant, such as the SS living quarters, were completely removed. These interventions make today's archaeological work more difficult.

Different layers of paint in the detention building from the time the camp was in operation and the post-war era, 2009
© Karl Scherzer



Floral pattern in an office in the detention building, 2010
© Karl Scherzer

Human Remains

At least 90,000 people died in Mauthausen, Gusen and the subcamps. Most of the dead were cremated. The ashes were scattered in various locations. After liberation, the dead were buried by the US Army on the camp's sports field. In the post-war period, most of the mass graves were dug up and the bodies re-buried. Concentration camp memorial sites are huge cemeteries.

When archaeologists find human remains, these are carefully recovered and then buried in the cemetery at the memorial. This was also the case in Melk, where investigations of the 'blood run-off ditch' turned up buttons, hair combs and other artefacts, but also human remains. These were buried in the garden at the memorial site.

Archaeological investigation of the ‚blood run-off ditch', Melk

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Further Reading

The following articles on the themes of the exhibition are available in German in *coMMents*, the e-journal of the Mauthausen Memorial:

- Barbara Hausmair, Yvonne Burger, M. Bianca D'Anna, Florian Schwanninger, Tommy Theine, Ulrike Töchterle, Peter Tropper: *TAGS: Häftlingsmarken des Konzentrationslagers Mauthausen aus historisch-archäologischer Perspektive*
  [TAGS: Prisoner Tags from the Mauthausen concentration camp in historical-archaeological perspective]
- Paul Mitchell: *Bauarchäologie in den Konzentrationslagern. Architektur als Quelle und Bedeutungsträger.*
  [Buildings archaeology in the concentration camps. Architecture as a source and bearer of meaning]
- Claudia Theune, Barbara Hausmair: *Von ersten Sichtbarmachungen zu multiperspektivischen archäologischen Forschungen an NS-Zwangslagern.*
  [From „Sichtbarmachung" to muli-facetted archaeological research at former Nazi camps]
- Claudia Theune: *Mauthausen und seine Außenlager.*
  [Mauthausen and its subcamps]

Database

Where legally possible and ethically acceptable to do so, the collection databases of the Mauthausen Memorial provide access to written documents, photographs, oral history interviews, artefacts, literature and the objects on display in the exhibition.

Documenting the drained pond, 2012

Archaeologists Claudia Theune and Barbara Hausmair documenting industrial scrap in the drained pond in the 'Wiener Graben' quarry from the basket of a fire engine's turntable ladder.

Back cover: Mauthausen, cellar used for disinfection, 2012